

Seizing the Opportunity: Educating Students with Disabilities in Charter Schools

Executive Summary

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Only about 20 percent of students with disabilities score at proficient levels on state assessments. Fewer than 70 percent earn a high school diploma within four years.

These statistics alone are enough to signal a crisis in the education of students with disabilities in the United States.

But the statistics only hint at the anxiety parents feel about what their children with disabilities will do after graduation, the fights they take on for access to quality educational programs, and the struggles of so many students to find a school where they feel safe and understood.

Charter schools, which operate with enhanced flexibility and accountability for results, are well-positioned to find new, creative solutions to these challenges. They have shown promise in using creativity to tackle other complex education problems, such as preparing more students from underserved backgrounds to succeed in college. Some charter schools are using their flexibility and focus on results to reach every child with a disability, but more schools should do this.

This report is the first step in developing an evidence base about how charter schools meet the needs of unique learners, how they can improve on this work, and what aspects of chartering as a governance model support or impede their ability to do so. Researchers at the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) and the National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools (NCSECS) spent the past 12 months studying charter schools that are getting results educating children with disabilities.

We studied 30 charter schools serving middle and high school grades from across the country. Each of the schools either showed promising results or were part of a charter management organization that has committed to piloting strategies—with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation—to better educate students with disabilities. We spent two days at each school, observing classrooms and interviewing teachers, administrators, and parents of students with disabilities. We conducted interviews and reviewed data to assess each school's approach, outcomes, and policy context.

This report describes the norms and practices at work in schools where we commonly observed students with disabilities showing academic success, parents expressing confidence in the school, and teachers feeling supported and successful with their students with disabilities. We found that effective education for these students depends on an integrated set of schoolwide principles that are set in action, reinforced, and sustained by intentional organizational systems and structures.

No single school exemplified every element, but taken together, the strategies we identified point to a roadmap schools can use to improve outcomes for students with disabilities in both charter and district schools.

The principles, systems, and structures we observed worked together in concert and reinforced one another through an organization-wide commitment to educating students with disabilities effectively. Our report shows what is possible when charter schools make special education an institutional priority and use their autonomy to meet every student's individual needs.

This will be difficult for any school organization to achieve. But the steps we outline will help our public education system ensure every student realizes his or her potential.

Three schoolwide principles drive individualized solutions

In the most promising charter schools, three principles—strong, trusting relationships, a problem-solving orientation, and blurred lines between special and general education—worked together in concert. They weren't just adopted by a few excellent teachers. Leaders prioritized them and created specific routines, policies, and structures to help everyone in the school uphold them. Teachers reinforced them in meetings, in their classrooms, and in discussions with families.

Nearly all the schools we visited demonstrated **meaningful relationships** with families, which parents told us was a notable improvement over their previous experiences with public schools. However, some schools went beyond respectful relationships and actually embraced parents—and students—as their *full partners* in designing individualized education goals. Parents were involved in every step of evaluating their child's progress and adjusting their goals as needed. These schools had excellent communication with families that emphasized students' assets—not their deficits—and considered problem solving a group activity.

Promising schools demonstrated a commitment to **problem solving around individual needs**—not just to comply with special education laws, but to maximize each student's potential. Educators in these schools didn't think about educating students with disabilities in terms of predetermined programs or services. Instead, they crafted programs of support around each student and continually re-evaluated them. They readily moved students in and out of support and devised new interventions when necessary.

This problem-solving mindset enabled them to **blur the academic and social lines**, ensuring no student felt a stigma associated with receiving interventions and support, and everyone could participate in general education academic and extracurricular activities as much as possible. This required what we came to call “hyper-collegiality” between general and special education teachers. They planned and taught as a team.

Importantly, this personalized approach extended to *all* students in the school—not just students with disabilities. These schools seemed to achieve greater inclusion not by making the learning experience for students with disabilities look more like traditional learning with additional support, but instead providing rich, individualized support to every student.

No two schools exhibited these principles to the same degree or in the same way. Indeed, we noted a continuum of engagement in each of the three principles among the schools we studied.

Intentional culture and structures reinforce the core principles

Critically, the most promising schools did not leave this work to chance. They intentionally set the right conditions to help educators throughout their organizations apply these principles in daily practice. They had leaders who were assertive in prioritizing the education of students with disabilities. They built cultures of mutual respect and solution seeking, employed intentional organizational structures and tools for collaboration, shared information and solved problems in real time, and they created flexible instructional approaches that leveraged data and technology.

A commitment to educating students with disabilities from school and network leadership shaped these schools in important but unexpected ways. Principals explicitly hired general and special educators for their commitment to—and experience with—inclusive teaching, differentiation, and problem solving. Directors of special education held prominent roles in the schools'

leadership. Principals, mindful of the effort it takes to effectively personalize instruction for all students, allocated ample staffing to support students with disabilities—and other students who needed additional help.

In the most coherent schools we found an unmistakable culture of mutual respect, inclusion, and shared responsibility for all students' success. When asked who was responsible for educating students with disabilities, they would answer, "Everyone" without hesitation. Teachers helped any student who needed it, and could turn to others for help troubleshooting issues their students encountered, regardless of that student's program. Among students, we found a culture of mutual respect and support. They readily offered help with school work, patiently gave their classmates time to participate in discussions, and cheered each other on in times of struggle or success.

Solid instructional practice, informed by data, was the bedrock of effective education for students with disabilities. Skilled general education teachers knew how to provide necessary support to diverse learners while keeping the rigor high and setting individual learning goals for students. In schools where general education teachers struggled, so did students with disabilities. Well-supported and well-resourced special education expertise was critical to schools' efforts to serve every student. However, even a great special education team could not make up for deficits in general education. It seemed critical for all educators to work in concert.

Adaptive software facilitated differentiation for all students, including students with disabilities. A host of technology tools facilitated communication between teachers and students, the adaptation of instructional material, and the implementation of accommodations and modifications. Data systems were embedded in teachers' professional toolkits that incorporated information on students' academic progress, provided space for teachers to share tips on how best to support individual students, and offered structured routines for consulting and using data to solve problems and target support.

While effective educators were clearly essential, we also found that schoolwide structures and organizational approaches could give teachers important latitude to differentiate and personalize instruction. Extended learning blocks, team teaching and co-teaching, and lessons designed to give students time to work independently were among the many instructional approaches that provided teachers and students this flexibility.

These schools invested time and effort to implement a robust Individualized Education Program (IEP) process that laid a foundation for communication and problem solving. They did not view it as a compliance burden. These schools scheduled and protected collaborative planning time because teachers and leaders alike viewed collaboration as an essential, not a luxury. They built protocols and routines for reviewing data on students and problem solving together.

Each of the principles and conditions we identified has some prior evidence base in effective education for students with disabilities. Our research implies that they cannot exist in isolation. A school's ability to effectively educate students with disabilities appears to depend on the combination of these practices, the intensity with which they are employed, and the organizational features that reinforce them.

The core organizational characteristics of charter schools, such as the flexibility to operate independently of a school district, the ability to hire and train teachers who are aligned with the school's philosophy, and external accountability requirements carry both advantages and constraints for effectively educating students with disabilities.

Seizing the opportunity for students with disabilities

Much of the good work at the schools we studied can be duplicated with existing staff and resources. But schools cannot achieve the results we seek by pursuing changes in isolation. Effective education of students with disabilities requires an organization-wide commitment.

These are the first steps all **schools, districts, and charter management organizations** can and should take:

- Ensure general education instruction—the foundation of special education—is of high quality and that all teachers can support diverse learners (e.g., classroom management, differentiation, grouping).

- Make students with disabilities a priority, and their progress a meaningful indicator of the school’s success.
- Accept that serving students with disabilities is shared work, not the sole responsibility of special education teachers and related services personnel.
- Attend to staff stability and morale.
- Build trust and mutual respect with families.
- Master core IEP processes and basic knowledge of accommodations—doing so will free educators to deal with real problem solving.
- Recognize that a personalized approach matters, but is hard to pull off—teachers will need consistent and dedicated time for collaboration, reflection, and learning.

Too many schools—both charter and district—cannot get to, or go much beyond, these first-order steps to catalyze innovation. They are constrained by insufficient resources, ineffective leadership, lack of alignment among staff, and other problems.

There are important steps **policymakers, philanthropists, and charter authorizers** should take to help schools overcome these barriers, including:

- Provide pre-service teacher and leadership training that emphasizes “gen ed is special ed.”
- Amend state and federal accountability systems to incentivize rigor and results—not just compliance to process—for students with disabilities.
- Ensure that adequate and fair funding follows students with disabilities to the school of their choice.
- Improve training, support, and accountability for charter school authorizers to ensure they can identify strong practices and outcomes for students with disabilities during application, oversight, and renewal processes.
- Catalyze more innovations in school designs, technologies that aid educator collaboration, and support systems for rural and independent schools.
- Encourage stronger collaborations between schools, postsecondary institutions, and other community organizations to help students with disabilities transition effectively to life after high school.

Even if every school adopted the strategies we identified, it may not be enough to close the achievement gap between students with IEPs and their peers. At the school in our study with the strongest overall outcomes, just half of students with IEPs had achieved grade-level proficiency. It is clear that new breakthroughs will be necessary to enable all students to meet their full potential.

All public schools have work ahead to realize the potential of every student with unique learning needs and unique abilities. Achieving that goal will take time, money, and political will. It will also require deliberate efforts to cultivate new approaches to educating students with diverse learning needs. Charter schools, with their inherent flexibility, are logical places to launch these efforts. We at CRPE and NCSECS will continue to posit new ideas and research promising steps toward this end.